

# DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 146 636

CS 501 866

AUTHOR Bacon, Wallace A.  
 TITLE Speech as a Humanistic Discipline.  
 PUB DATE Aug 77  
 NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the University of the Philippines, August 3, 1977

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.  
 DESCRIPTORS \*Enrichment Experience; \*Humanistic Education; Humanities; Human Relations; \*Individual Development; Interdisciplinary Approach; Interpretive Reading; \*Literature Appreciation; \*Speech Communication

## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses speech communication's expansion as a discipline and its relation to the rest of the humanities. Focusing on the interpretation of literature, a speech communication course that relates to several other fields of study, the paper stresses the individual development that can occur through the experiences offered by the study of speech communication. (RL)

\*\*\*\*\*  
 \* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished \*  
 \* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort \*  
 \* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal \*  
 \* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality \*  
 \* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available \*  
 \* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not \*  
 \* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions \*  
 \* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. \*  
 \*\*\*\*\*

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

SPEECH AS A HUMANISTIC DISCIPLINE  
University of the Philippines, August 3, 1977

Wallace A. Bacon

I am grateful for this opportunity once again to speak at the University of the Philippines, and to bring good wishes from many friends at Northwestern University and in the Speech Communication Association. The ties between U. P. and training in Speech in the United States are many and strong--to say nothing of my own personal ties with the Department of Speech and Drama which have meant so much to me for many years now. Returning to U.P. is always for me a homecoming.

Over the years, there has been an almost incredible growth in the range of courses embraced by the term Speech--or, more recently, Speech Communication. A catalogue of courses in the old Cumnock School of Oratory, the forerunner of Northwestern University's School of Speech, listed a total of about twelve classes for programs which ran through the junior and senior years only. The current School of Speech catalogue lists something like 230 courses which run from the freshman year through the M.A. and doctoral programs, and distributed among six departments of the School (one of which is my own department-- Interpretation). Work in Speech includes theater, radio-television-film, communication studies, audiology, speech and language pathology, speech sciences (such as acoustics, phonetics,

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS  
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Wallace A. Bacon

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES  
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND  
USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

ED146636

CS 501 866

anatomy, electronic instrumentation), and speech education, in addition to interpretation. Speech is in fact a small college within the University, with its own Dean and faculty and approximately 1400 students, of whom 1100 are undergraduates, 200 are M. A. candidates and 100 are doctoral students.

While programs are not equally extensive at many other institutions, the range of activities at Northwestern nevertheless does reflect the range of courses in Speech Communication among the institutions whose members belong to the Speech Communication Association. From a subject which once upon a time devoted itself principally to public speaking, debating, and elocution, Speech Communication has grown into a study of both ordered and disordered processes of the whole range of communication activities. In fact, the School of Speech embraces within its own walls the same divisions of interest found in the College of Arts and Sciences--the humanities, the social and behavioral sciences, and the exact sciences. I do not mean to suggest that students in the School of Speech restrict their course work to the School. Like students in all the other Schools, they take courses in general education which cut across School lines, and anywhere from a third to two thirds of their course work may be outside the School of Speech.

Graduate<sup>s</sup> of speech communication programs across the country go into a wide range of professional fields. Traditional occupations like teaching and acting and speech consultant continue; but in

addition, clinicians are trained for institutions throughout the world, audiologists work in conjunction with the School of Medicine, television graduates find employment in various kinds of media relationships, film students produce their own films (often award-winning films), communication studies graduates find themselves working in legal communication, medical communication, and health services communication settings. Indeed, it is difficult any longer to catalogue the kinds of occupations into which graduates may enter.

Some sense of the proliferation of our work may be found in a recent statement by a major publishing house in the United States that, in the next decade, communications would be their major publishing thrust.

As president of SCA, I must confess that the variety of activities with which I feel I ought to be acquainted leaves me quite dizzy. I cannot easily communicate with some of the members of our organization. Experimental studies and computer projects seem far away from my own teaching of Shakespeare's plays, until I remind myself that the computer has helped produce the most recent edition of those plays, and the concordance based on that edition, and that it is being used in studies of the prosody and diction of Shakespeare. There was a time, clearly, when the Renaissance Man was possible--that creature who embraced the whole of organized knowledge of his time. But for better or worse, that time is long since gone. Most of us nowadays

try to do the best we can within the limits of our own small gardens, and we hope that helping hands may be stretched out to us across the walls.

My own field is the interpretation of literature, which is closely related to some aspects of theatre, though certainly not identical with them. The Department of Interpretation has, over the academic year, a total of 22 courses--some of them running for more than a single quarter, some of them repeating for two or three quarters, and each limited to no more than 20 students, normally. Our roots are with the humanities--with theatre, on the one hand; with the English Department, on the other. We share, with Communication Studies and with the media, an interest in projection of experience to an audience; rhetorical studies and literary studies alike contribute to our knowledge of texts in performance. But we differ from theatre in being interested, first of all, in the relationship between the single performer and his text; we differ, also, in not seeing the public event as a necessary part of our endeavor. We differ from Communication Studies in seeing our center as communion rather than communication. While some writers clearly write to persuade others, there are many writers who seek primarily to create, in language, the total meaning and feeling of experience. As one critic has said, they make experience come true rather than telling the truth about experience.

For centuries teachers and scholars engaged in the study of literature have written, and very often wisely, about the nature of the literary text: its origins, its texture, its structure, its ideas, its milieu. But as Walter Slatoff pointed out in his book With Respect to Readers, as late as 1970, until then "Scarcely a work [had] been addressed to the problem of what in general or specific instances constitutes a full or adequate as opposed to merely appropriate response."<sup>1</sup> Slatoff points to the fact that while the reading of literature is a private activity, the study of literature is essentially a public activity, lengthening the distance between reader and text (p. 9).

Since 1970, interpretation has received steadily increasing attention from teachers of English, partly as a result of the Dartmouth Conference in 1966,<sup>2</sup> which pointed to the need for greater participation in the literary experience on the part of the reader.

Within the field of Speech, that interest began somewhat earlier, sometimes traced to a book written by myself and my colleague Robert S. Breen, Literature as Experience (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959). The virtue of interpretation, in this context, is that it brings together in a vital way the public and the private activities. Even if the reader is an audience only for himself, when he reads aloud he hears and listens. As he does, he perceives. Henry James said long ago that only under the pressure of being read aloud does literature give out its "finest

and most numerous secrets" (Preface to The Golden Bowl), and many teachers and students of interpretation will bear witness to the stimulation which the involvement with a text in performance can produce. There are dangers: texts can be mangled in performance. Hence the past three decades have seen many scholars in interpretation insisting upon close study of the written text prior to performance. That has been an important and fruitful insistence, but it has been clear that study of the text itself will not necessarily issue in significant performance. Hence more and more, in the past fifteen years, interpreters have concerned themselves with what happens to both text and performer when the two are brought together. Some teachers have concerned themselves primarily with what happens within the performer, but that interest quickly shades off into psychological study and becomes what is essentially a distinct discipline.

Interpretation generally accepts two facts: the fact of the text; the fact of the reader. Joined to those two facts, ultimately, are two others: the fact of the writer; the fact of an audience. The literary text, as the phenomenologist sees it, exists as a structure of norms, a potential cause of experience which works through sound, diction, symbols, metaphors, metaphysical qualities to create objects, scenes, events, feelings, people. Into that structure the writer puts as much as he can of the experience he seeks to capture in language.

The process of selection through which he goes is complicated; it is often unconscious, since he works with a medium (language) which has long been a part of him. The language itself has a body--a structure; its syntax sets up expectations, limitations, directions. The created context in turn affects meaning. The phrase "What am I supposed to make of that?", for example, may be angry, whimsical, questioning, amazed, and so on, deriving its tone from surrounding sentences. And there are words which set up totally private responses in the reader: Wordsworth mentions a tree, and he would be surprised if he knew you supplied a palm tree in response to his word, but you may do exactly that. Readers, in reading, constitute or realize ("make real") texts. As Roman Ingarden points out in his studies of the literary work of art (The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art; The Literary Work of Art), in realizing texts we may underconstitute them--not supplying enough; overconstitute them--supplying too much; or falsify them--supplying the wrong responses to cues. But what happens in any case is that the potential cause of experience, the structure in language which we think of as the novel or the story or the play or the poem, comes to life. It has the form of all life acts--inception, acceleration, climax, cadence, to use Susanne Langer's description of acts. It is a creation, man-made by the poet, reborn in the reader.

But the rebirth is never--can never be--synonymous with the birth. No two forms in nature ever exactly repeat themselves,

however much they may resemble one another. My reading of Wordsworth's poem can never be exactly Wordsworth's, though I think that both he and I would be sorry if the two bore no resemblance to one another. The poem exercises a measure of control over my response; but my response in turn acts upon the poem and makes it, in a particularly meaningful and intimate way, mine. There is something of me in my every reading of a literary work. The work is not I; only the naive reader replaces the work with himself. Nevertheless my reading is not exactly the writer's reading, nor your reading.

It is this partly recreative, partly creative endeavor which constitutes the art of interpretation, and it is the coming in touch with literary works of art in this intimate and active way which makes the subject in the fullest sense humanistic. It trains the mind, it trains the body, it educates the senses. It introduces students not only to ideas but to the feel of ideas, which is what ultimately matters to the poet. "How does a work of art feel when it means?" That is the essential question for the interpreter. The literary critic may ask "What does it mean?" "How is it structured?" "What are the influences upon it?" "How does one describe its syntax, its figures, its prosody?" All these questions are of concern, too, to the interpreter--but they concern him because they are part of his investigation of the whole act which constitutes the body of the work of literature. It is this body which he must,

in turn, embody--and hence, by the nature of that transfer, in some sense alter. The work of art enters his body; it becomes part of his experience. By being led out of himself, into the body of the other, he is himself changed. Education, which means "a leading out," returns us to ourselves in some fashion changed. When we enter into the body of a great literary work, we are returned to ourselves bettered.

Hence interpretation is essentially and profoundly humanistic in providing for us a sense of being. We know ourselves only by knowing others; when that "other" is a great literary work, we learn from it something of ourselves. The actor in the theatre, too, learns in this way. His discipline, too, is essentially humanistic. Educational theatre builds upon the study of writers and texts, not simply upon external techniques of performance. The theatre in a university is not, properly seen, a trade school. It should train and educate actors, not simply make use of them.

The study of rhetoric, of interpersonal communication, of group processes is also part of the humanistic tradition. Once upon a time, rhetoric was seen as part of the trivium, that part of the educational scheme which included also grammar and logic. And in some sense, rhetoric remains at the heart of the educational process--man interacting with man: How does he manage it? Again it is an awareness of the otherness of the other which is crucial. The wisest man in the world locked up in a closet would not long remain the wisest man in the world. Milton

long ago spoke out against a fugitive and cloistered virtue; virtue is virtue when it stands the test of the world. And so with wisdom. Life demands not retreat but commitment from us; the uncommitted life, it has been said, is not worth living. But commitments need to be examined, considered, compared. Rhetoric, interpersonal communication, group processes are all ways of making these examinations and comparisons. They are all concerned with the central fact of man's being a social creature. They are essentially humanistic.

It is clear enough that Speech is a curious discipline. One cannot long study human interaction without getting deeply involved in the various subjects which are of concern to men and women. It will not do to train someone simply in techniques for handling interpersonal relations and then send him or her forth as if the process were all he or she needed. A communication specialist who seeks to offer services to lawyers will need to know something about health care. We are most emphatically an interdisciplinary endeavor, and we must work closely, in our various branches, with colleagues in history, sociology, English, anthropology, the law, medicine--the list is endless. When we see ourselves as a department cut off from other disciplines, teaching simply, in some limited sense, techniques of speaking or reading or acting or filming or adjudicating, we cut ourselves off from the source of a major part of our nourishment, and we seem then to be sounding cymbals in an empty

room. We must be concerned always not simply with the "how to" (how to speak, how to read, how to debate, etc.) but with the "what to" and the "when to" and the "why". More and more, it seems to me, teachers and scholars in Speech Communication have come to recognize this, and to engage in meaningful dialogue with colleagues in other disciplines.

I can illustrate it, once again, perhaps, by referring to my own discipline, interpretation. In the past two or three years, teachers of English, of philosophy, of aesthetics, of foreign languages have grown curious about students from the Department of Interpretation who have gone into their courses and brought to literary study what seems to them a new and rather sophisticated understanding of texts. For too long, the study of literature has forgotten the reader, has forgotten that traditionally the process of thinking has removed the student from the world of lived experience, held it at a distance, objectified it. We do not normally, when we say we are "thinking" about something, concentrate upon the feel of the thoughts, the feel of the ideas, the feel of the words. Thinking is a way of letting us transcend that world of lived experience--and transcendence is important. But the work of art does not want such transcendence; it wants to be inhabited, felt, in the fullest possible way. In the work of art, we do care about the feel of thoughts, the feel of ideas, the feel of words. We care about the active movement, the ebb and flow, of the work. This is not, I hasten to say, at the expense of thought. But the thinking process becomes felt thinking,

immanence rather than transcendence. And this sense of the operation of the work of art has been explored and is being explored by scholars in Interpretation in a way which interests colleagues in other, related disciplines from whom we have learned--and will continue to learn--much about literature. In some ways, it seems to me too bad that in 18th century England it became fashionable to put English literature into the school-room as a subject of study, and for us to have made it a Department of the University. Our sense of order and distinctions often cuts literature off from life. It becomes something to study rather than something to be felt and loved. How many people nowadays find themselves buying a book of poems just for the love of poetry?

There's nothing wrong with study, heaven knows. I'm all for it. But literature needs to be shared with historians, with musicians, with philosophers, with lawyers, with business men--it needs once again to be made part of the felt sensing of men and women in general, not to be left the province of the Department of English. Interpretation has this virtue, I think--that it demands that literature, in the full strength of its felt sensing, be shared. It must, ultimately, become part of our experience of the lived world. It becomes a way of freeing, strengthening, giving wings to the human spirit. And that, as I see it, is what the humanities are all about.

F O O T N O T E S

<sup>1</sup>P. 38. The book was published by the Cornell University Press.

<sup>2</sup>See my monograph, Oral Interpretation and the Teaching of Literature in Secondary Schools, ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, Urbana, Illinois, 1974.